

150th Anniv. Women's Rights
Seneca Falls, New York
7/16/98

PHOTOCOPY
PRESERVATION

First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton
150th Anniversary of the First Women's Rights Convention
Seneca Falls, New York
July 16, 1998

Thank you for gathering here in such numbers for this important celebration. I want to thank Governor Pataki and Congresswoman Slaughter and all the elected officials who are here with us today. I want to thank Mary Anne and her committee for helping to organize such a great celebration. I want to thank Bob Stanton and the entire Park Service staff for doing such an excellent job with the historic site. I want to thank our choirs. I thought the choirs really added; I want to thank our singers whom we've already heard from and will hear from because this is a celebration and we need to think about it in such terms.

But for a moment, I would like you to take your minds back a hundred and fifty years. Imagine if you will that you are Charlotte Woodward, a nineteen-year-old glove maker working and living in Waterloo. Everyday you sit for hours sewing gloves together, working for small wages you cannot even keep, with no hope of going on in school or owning property, knowing that if you marry, your children and even the clothes on your body will belong to your husband.

But then one day in July, 1848, you hear about a women's rights convention to be held in nearby Seneca Falls. It's a convention to discuss the social, civil, and religious conditions and rights of women. You run from house to house and you find other women who have heard the same news. Some are excited, others are amused or even shocked, and a few agree to come with you, for at least the first day.

When that day comes, July 19, 1848, you leave early in the morning in your horse-drawn wagon. You fear that no one else will come; and at first, the road is empty, except for you and your neighbors. But suddenly, as you reach a crossroads, you see a few more wagons and carriages, then more and more all going towards Wesleyan Chapel. Eventually you join the others to form one long procession on the road to equality.

Who were the others traveling that road to equality, traveling to that convention? Frederick Douglass, the former slave and great abolitionist, was on his way there and he described the participants as "few in numbers, moderate in resources, and very little known in the world. The most we had to connect us was a firm commitment that we were in the right and a firm faith that the right must ultimately prevail." In the wagons and carriages, on foot or horseback, were women like Rhoda Palmer. Seventy years later in 1918, at the age of one-hundred and two, she would cast her first ballot in a New York state election.

Also traveling down that road to equality was Susan Quinn, who at fifteen will become the

youngest signer of the Declaration of Sentiments. Catharine F. Stebbins, a veteran of activism starting when she was only twelve going door to door collecting anti-slavery petitions. She also, by the way, kept an anti-tobacco pledge on the parlor table and asked all her young male friends to sign up. She was woman truly ahead of her time, as all the participants were.

I often wonder, when reflecting back on the Seneca Falls Convention, who of us -- men and women -- would have left our homes, our families, our work to make that journey one hundred and fifty years ago. Think about the incredible courage it must have taken to join that procession. Ordinary men and women, mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors. And just like those who have embarked on other journeys throughout American history, seeking freedom or escaping religious or political persecution, speaking out against slavery, working for labor rights. These men and women were motivated by dreams of better lives and more just societies.

At the end of the two-day convention, one hundred people, sixty-eight women and thirty-two men, signed the Declaration of Sentiments that you can now read on the wall at Wesleyan Chapel. Among the signers were some of the names we remember today: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott, Martha Wright and Frederick Douglass and young Charlotte Woodward. The "Seneca Falls 100," as I like to call them, shared the radical idea that America fell far short of her ideals stated in our founding documents, denying citizenship to women and slaves.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who is frequently credited with originating the idea for the Convention, knew that women were not only denied legal citizenship, but that society's cultural values and social structures conspired to assign women only one occupation and role, that of wife and mother. Of course, the reality was always far different. Women have always worked, and worked both in the home and outside the home for as long as history can record. And even though Stanton herself had a comfortable life and valued deeply her husband and seven children, she knew that she and all other women were not truly free if they could not keep wages they earned, divorce an abusive husband, own property, or vote for the political leaders who governed them. Stanton was inspired, along with the others who met, to rewrite our Declaration of Independence, and they boldly asserted, "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal."

"All men and all women." It was the shout heard around the world, and if we listen, we can still hear its echoes today. We can hear it in the voices of women demanding their full civil and political rights anywhere in the world. I've heard such voices and their echoes from women, around the world, from Belfast to Bosnia to Beijing, as they work to change the conditions for women and girls and improve their lives and the lives of their families. We can even hear those echoes today in Seneca Falls. We come together this time not by carriage, but by car or plane, by train or foot, and yes, in my case, by bus. We come together not to hold a convention, but to celebrate those who met here one hundred and fifty years ago, to commemorate how far we have traveled since then, and to challenge ourselves to persevere on the journey that was begun all those many years ago.

We are, as one can see looking around this great crowd, men and women, old and young,

different races, different backgrounds. We come to honor the past and imagine the future. That is the theme the President and I have chosen for the White House Millennium Council's efforts to remind and inspire Americans as we approach the year 2000. This is my last stop on the Millennium Council's tour to Save America's Treasures -- those buildings, monuments, papers and sites -- that define who we are as a nation. They include not only famous symbols like the Star Spangled Banner and not only great political leaders like George Washington's revolutionary headquarters, or creative inventors like Thomas Edison's invention factory, but they include also the women of America who wrote our nation's past and must write its future.

Women like the ones we honor here and, in fact, at the end of my tour yesterday, I learned that I was following literally in the footsteps of one of them, Lucretia Mott, who, on her way to Seneca Falls, stopped in Auburn to visit former slaves and went on to the Seneca Nations to meet with clan mothers, as I did.

Last evening, I visited the home of Mary Ann and Thomas M'Clintock in Waterloo, where the Declaration of Sentiments was drafted, and which the Park Service is planning to restore for visitors if the money needed can be raised. I certainly hope I can return here sometime in the next few years to visit that restoration.

Because we must tell and retell, learn and relearn, these women's stories, and we must make it our personal mission, in our everyday lives, to pass these stories on to our daughters and sons. Because we cannot -- we must not -- ever forget that the rights and opportunities that we enjoy as women today were not just bestowed upon us by some benevolent ruler. They were fought for, agonized over, marched for, jailed for and even died for by brave and persistent women and men who came before us.

Every time we buy or sell or inherit property in our own name -- let us thank the pioneers who agitated to change the laws that made that possible.

Every time, every time we vote, let us thank the women and men of Seneca Falls, Susan B. Anthony and all the others, who tirelessly crossed our nation and withstood ridicule and the rest to bring about the 19th Amendment to the Constitution.

Every time we enter an occupation -- a profession of our own choosing and receive a paycheck that reflect earnings equal to a male colleague, let us thank the signers and women like Kate Mullaney, who's house I visited yesterday, in Troy, New York

Every time we elect a woman to office -- let us thank ground breaking leaders like Jeannette Rankin and Margaret Chase Smith, Hattie Caraway, Louise Slaughter, Bella Abzug, Shirley Chisholm -- all of whom proved that a woman's place is truly in the House, and in the Senate, and one day, in the White House, as well.

And every time we take another step forward for justice in this nation -- let us thank extraordinary women like Harriet Tubman, who's home in Auburn I visited yesterday, and who

escaped herself from slavery, and, then risked her life, time and again, to bring at least two hundred other slaves to freedom as well.

Harriet Tubman's rule for all of her underground railroad missions was to keep going. Once you started--no matter how scared you got, how dangerous it became -- you were not allowed to turn back. That's a pretty good rule for life. It not only describes the women who gathered in Wesleyan Chapel in 1848, but it could serve as our own motto for today. We, too, cannot turn back. We, too, must keep going in our commitment to the dignity of every individual -- to women's rights as human rights. We are on that road of the pioneers to Seneca Falls, they started down it 150 years ago. But now, we too, must keep going.

We may not face the criticism and derision they did. They understood that the Declaration of Sentiments would create no small amount of misconception, or misrepresentation and ridicule; they were called mannish women, old maids, fanatics, attacked personally by those who disagreed with them. One paper said, "These rights for women would bring a monstrous injury to all mankind." If it sounds familiar, it's the same thing that's always said when women keep going for true equality and justice.

Those who came here also understood that the convention and the Declaration were only first steps down that road. What matters most is what happens when everyone packs up and goes back to their families and communities. What matters is whether sentiment and resolutions, once made, are fulfilled or forgotten. The Seneca Falls one hundred pledged themselves to petition, and lit the pulpit and used every instrumentality within their power to affect their subjects. And they did. But they also knew they were not acting primarily for themselves. They knew they probably would not even see the changes they advocated in their own lifetime. In fact, only Charlotte Woodward lived long enough to see American women finally win the right to vote.

Those who signed that Declaration were doing it for the girls and women -- for us -- those of us in the twentieth century.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote a letter to her daughters later in life enclosing a special gift and explaining why. "Dear Maggie and Hattie, this is my first speech," she wrote, "it contains all I knew at that time; I give this manuscript to my precious daughters in the hopes that they will finish the work that I have begun." And they have. Her daughter, Harriot Blatch, was the chief strategist of the suffrage movement in New York. Harriot's daughter, Nora Barney, was one of the first women to be a civil engineer. Nora's daughter, Rhoda Jenkins, became an architect. Rhoda's daughter, Colleen Jenkins-Sahlin is an elected official in Greenwich, Connecticut. And her daughter, Elizabeth is a thirteen-year-old, who wrote about the six generations of Stantons in a book called, 33 Things Every Girl Should Know.

So, far into the twentieth century, the work is still being done; the journey goes on. Now, some might say that the only purpose of this celebration is to honor the past, that the work begun here is finished in America, that young women no longer face legal obstacles to whatever education

or employment choices they choose to pursue. And I certainly believe and hope all of you agree that we should, every day, count our blessings as American women.

I know how much change I have seen in my own life. When I was growing up back in the fifties and sixties, there were still barriers that Mrs. Stanton would have recognized -- scholarships I couldn't apply for, schools I couldn't go to, jobs I couldn't have -- just because of my sex. Thanks to federal laws like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title 9, and the Equal Pay Act, legal barriers to equality have fallen.

But if all we do is honor the past, then I believe we will miss the central point of the Declaration of Sentiments, which was, above all, a document about the future. The drafters of the Declaration imagined a different future for women and men, in a society based on equality and mutual respect. It falls to every generation to imagine the future, and it our task to do so now.

We know that, just as the women 150 years ago knew, that what we imagine will be principally for our daughters and sons in the 21st century. Because the work of the Seneca Falls Convention is just like the work of the nation itself, it's never finished, so long as there remain gaps between our ideals and reality. That is one of the great joys and beauties of the American experiment. We are always striving to build and move toward a more perfect union, that we on every occasion keep faith with our founding ideals, and translate them into reality. So what kind of future can we imagine together.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- then no American should ever again face discrimination on the basis of gender, race or sexual orientation anywhere in our country.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- then \$0.76 in a woman's paycheck for every dollar in a man's is still not enough. Equal pay for equal work can once and for all be achieved.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- then families need more help to balance their responsibilities at work and at home. In a letter to Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton writes, "Come here and I will do what I can to help you with your address, if you will hold the baby and make the pudding." Even then, women knew we had to have help with child care. All families should have access to safe, affordable, quality child care.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- then women and children must be protected against what the Declaration called the "chastisement of women," namely domestic abuse and violence. We must take all steps necessary to end the scourge of violence against women and punish the perpetrator. And our country must join the rest of the world, as so eloquently Secretary Albright called for on Saturday night here in Seneca Falls, "Join the rest of the world and ratify the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against women."

If we are to finish the work begun here -- we must do more than talk about family values, we must adopt polices that truly value families -- policies like a universal system of health care

insurance that guarantees every American's access to affordable, quality health care. Policies like taking all steps necessary to keep guns out of the hands of children and criminals. Policies like doing all that is necessary at all levels of our society to ensure high quality public education for every boy or girl no matter where that child lives.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- we must ensure that women and men who work full-time earn a wage that lifts them out of poverty and all workers who retire have financial security in their later years through guaranteed Social Security and pensions.

If we are to finish the work begun here -- we must be vigilant against the messages of a media-driven consumer culture that convinces our sons and daughters that what brand of sneakers they wear or cosmetics they use is more important than what they think, feel, know, or do.

And if we are to finish the work begun here -- we must, above all else, take seriously the power of the vote and use it to make our voices heard. What the champions of suffrage understood was that the vote is not just a symbol of our equality, but that it can be, if used, a guarantee of results. It is the way we express our political views. It is the way we hold our leaders and governments accountable. It is the way we bridge the gap between what we want our nation to be and what it is.

But when will the majority of women voters of our country exercise their most fundamental political right? Can you imagine what any of the Declaration signers would say if they learned how many women fail to vote in elections? They would be amazed and outraged. They would agree with a poster I saw in 1996. On it, there is a picture of a woman with a piece of tape covering her mouth and under it, it says, "Most politicians think women should be seen and not heard. In the last election, 54 million women agreed with them."

One hundred and fifty years ago, the women at Seneca Falls were silenced by someone else. Today, women, we silence ourselves. We have a choice. We have a voice. And if we are going to finish the work begun here we must exercise our right to vote in every election we are eligible to vote in.

Much of who women are and what women do today can be traced to the courage, vision, and dedication of the pioneers who came together at Seneca Falls. Now it is our responsibility to finish the work they began. Let's ask ourselves, at the 200th anniversary of Seneca Falls, will they say that today's gathering also was a catalyst for action? Will they say that businesses, labor, religious organizations, the media, foundations, educators, every citizen in our society came to see the unfinished struggle of today as their struggle?

Will they say that we joined across lines of race and class, that we raised up those too often pushed down, and ultimately found strength in each other's differences and resolved in our common cause? Will we, like the champions at Seneca Falls, recognize that men must play a central role in this fight? How can we ever forget the impassioned plea of Frederick Douglass, issued in our defense

of the right to vote?

How can we ever forget that young legislator from Tennessee by the name of Harry Burns, who was the deciding vote in ratifying the 19th Amendment. He was planning on voting "no," but then he got a letter from his mother with a simple message. The letter said, "Be a good boy Harry and do the right thing." And he did! Tennessee became the last state to ratify, proving that you can never ever overestimate the power of one person to alter the course of history, or the power of a little motherly advice.

Will we look back and see that we have finally joined the rest of the advanced economies by creating systems of education, employment, child care and health care that support and strengthen families and give all women real choices in their lives.

At the 200th anniversary celebration, will they say that women today supported each other in the choices we make? Will we admit once and for all there is no single cookie cutter model for being a successful and fulfilled woman today, that we have so many choices? We can choose full-time motherhood or no family at all or, like most of us, seek to strike a balance between our family and our work, always trying to do what is right in our lives. Will we leave our children a world where it is self-evident that all men and women, boys and girls are created equal? These are some of the questions we can ask ourselves.

Help us imagine a future that keeps faith with the sentiments expressed here in 1848. The future, like the past and the present, will not and cannot be perfect. Our daughters and granddaughters will face new challenges which we today cannot even imagine. But each of us can help prepare for that future by doing what we can to speak out for justice and equality for women's rights and human rights, to be on the right side of history, no matter the risk or cost, knowing that eventually the sentiments we express and the causes we advocate will succeed because they are rooted in the conviction that all people are entitled by their creator and by the promise of America to the freedom, rights, responsibilities, and opportunity of full citizenship. That is what I imagine for the future. I invite you to imagine with me and then to work together to make that future a reality.

Thank you all very much.